

## *Pretty Cure* and the Magical Girl Media Mix

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TOEI ANIMATION'S MOST POPULAR AND LUCRATIVE ORIGINAL TELEVISION anime are its "magical girl" series, starting from the *shōjo* (girls) manga adaptation of *Sally the Witch* (*Mabōtsukai Sally*, 1966–68) and climaxing with the globally popular animated television series *Sailor Moon* (1991–97), and its many spin-offs and sequels. Much of Toei's creative manpower is directed toward these magical girls, from which it has earned high profits and for which it has maintained a particularly strong business model over the last twenty-five years. The annual films based off of these television series are routinely among Toei's top grossing of the year, while the toys based off of their licenses comprise the bulk of over seven billion yen in annual merchandise sales (Masuda 72–74; Toei Animation 15). I spent six months from February to July of 2012 witnessing this very business model through observation of the production of the original television anime series, *Smile Precure!* (2012–2013), also known in the US as *Glitter Force*, an iteration of its principal magical girl series, *Pretty Cure* (2004–). The *Pretty Cure* series has broadcast for over a decade and revolves around contemporary Japanese adolescent girls who are granted the ability to transform into princesses with magical abilities and physical combat skills.

In addition to being a popular television series, *Smile Precure!* can also be considered a program length commercial or advertisement, also known as a PLC, since it is essentially a television show created to sell toys through its sponsor, Bandai Namco. Products in PLC shows are collaboratively constructed and spread to a domestic Japanese audience through a committee-centered model known in Japan as a media mix. The media mix is a form of serial media production similar in concept to what Henry Jenkins has identified as "transmedia," though here the

media mix relies less on “storytelling,” as in Jenkins’ original conception of transmedia, and more on qualities that relate to producers’ and consumers’ experience of the media in connection to the creation of anime worlds and characters that revolve around elaborately crafted toys. Anime has a particular ability to create a media experience through its integration of media and toy products. The “magical girl media mix” exemplified by *Pretty Cure* owes its financial and creative successes to the convergence of multiple creators who use such sponsored products as brainstorming and expressive tools.

### Experiencing the Original Media Mix

Scholars of digital media have increasingly demonstrated that media consumption in the digital age occurs across multiple formats and timeframes, namely as a result of the proliferation of transmedia franchises over the course of the past decade. With transmedia storytelling, a single story is told serially across multiple platforms, “with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 97–98). While transmedia storytelling prioritizes a multimedia sequential narrative, multiple forms of media need not be consumed serially, and scholars of both digital and analog forms of media have approached multimedia consumption from angles other than narratological models. Television and media theorists have investigated the idea of a continuous media experience through such concepts as televisual “flow” (Williams 86–120; Uricchio), the industrial politics of “convergence” (Caldwell; Deuze), and cinematic world-building (Andrews 37–47; Wolf 111–45).

In Japan, transmedia is often conceived through a media mix of multiple media properties, a phenomenon that can be traced back to the adaptation of manga into confectionary-sponsored television animation in the 1960s. Marc Steinberg has articulated this idea of “anime as experience,” calling the media mix an effective transformation of Japanese society into a “media environment” that is “understood to designate both the media ecology as a system of media and its lived experience by human subjects” (xi). In other words, a media mix is not just a phalanx of media properties, but a way of engaging with the objects of that media. In Steinberg’s example, Osamu Tezuka’s *Tetsuwan Atomu* created the first media mix through its

adaptation of the popular manga into a television anime. Key to this mobility were both the techniques of limited animation that transpose the manga's image easily to alternative media formats, and the role of the sponsor in facilitating the adaptation process. Tezuka would make his anime at a loss, but could recoup his investment through sales of character-related merchandise. Television anime, in this way, was harvested with transmedia potential from its inception through its relation to both alternative media formats and the necessary role of the sponsor. This legacy and curse continue to this day, as anime typically is made at a loss of a million yen per episode, and must rely on sales of media or merchandise to make a profit (Tada 81).

Steinberg's connection between the sponsor and the producer, with anime in mind, relates to Scott Lash and Celia Lury's contention that culture in the age of the global culture industries has become "thingified" (Lash and Lury 4). Lash and Lury put particular importance on thingification that stems from animation, where "the characters in films may be reproduced without undermining their singularity" and are divorced from their original narratives, reappearing in different media as accessories or toys and "thus becoming available to be re-embedded in other spaces, other times, in play" (Lash and Lury 97). Lash and Lury emphasize animation's ability to imbue the object with personality through the force of its association with characters. Steinberg further argues that the strength of "anime's media mix" lies in its ability to imbricate characters into multiple areas of social life. Moreover, as media becomes something to purchase and play, audiences are asked to assimilate various character-commodities into their daily lives, thus creating an experience around media that goes beyond issues of narrative. The collaborative activity and processes behind the creation of anime mirrors many of these developments, with characters and worlds comprising continuous programming, interactivity, textual interstitials, and user flows across multiple media forms.

As Steinberg, Lash, and Lury argue, productification in visual mass media is hardly a new development. The practice has a long history in film, with franchises from James Bond to Star Wars integrating products into their media in various ways. Scholars have chronicled, for example, the Bond franchise's heavy reliance on product placement and advertising (Weiner et al.), as well as George Lucas's multimedia monster that spawned a legion of Kenner-produced toys (Sansweet 60–95). Television has always had a direct relationship with sponsors

and advertisers of programs, though in the United States, children's television was protected from many of advertising's more nefarious practices due to regulations by the FCC. Such restrictions began to change during the business-friendly climate of the Reaganite 1980s, however, when programs were produced to directly promote new toy lines. Tom Englehardt termed this the "Strawberry Shortcake" strategy, in reference to the program that successfully spawned the practice of creating a toy first and a television show second in order to advertise it (72–73). Strawberry Shortcake cartoons were produced to hawk greeting cards and dolls, but extended to a wide range of licensed merchandise ranging from stickers to clothing and food. These license-heavy PLCs became popular with a wide range of character properties, airing on syndicated private stations and accounting for 90% of new children's productions by the 1990s (Kline 139). This practice was virtually mirrored in Japanese television, with animated television shows being linked to sponsors who specialized in toy production, such as Popy's *Chogokin* "super alloy" figures produced for *Mazinger* and Bandai's *Gunpla* "plastic model" figures produced for *Gundam* (Onozuka 23–34). Hori Takahiro correctly notes that the goal of such shows is not TV ratings, but rather to sell toys, and stories are conceived to feature the toys in attractive ways (Hori 41–43).

This productification also occurs with original anime today. While most anime is derived from manga or light novel (pulp illustrated novella) adaptations, some anime is created from scratch. Some well-known examples include television anime series that revolve around piloted mechanical robots, such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979–1980) or *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996), or that feature magical girls, such as *Magical Angel Creamy Mami* (1984–1985) and *Pretty Cure*. These original series are designed by committees, typically composed of a production studio, television network, and toy company sponsor, such as Bandai Namco or Takara Tomy (see Denison et al.). Such a model originated in live-action *sentai* fighting series, the most commonly known version being the US localized *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993–1995), where Anne Allison has documented, sponsors integrated products into television series "that would translate, directly and repeatedly, to the desire to buy (their brand of) toy merchandise" (112).

While *Pretty Cure* falls into this same product-driven mold, what makes it unique is its blending of target audiences: it is a program

developed for young girls but that relies on the sort of action-intensive products that are used to target young boys. These products are symbolic of the show's divided viewing audience, which is primarily composed of young girls and a residual audience of older males, and also of its production, which is comprised of producers, toy makers, and scriptwriters who compose scripts designed to bring out the "physical beauty and soft feelings usually emphasized when targeting girls," and directors and animators, whose experience and preferences within the animated medium have been attuned to bring out the "physical action and technological dazzle when targeting young boys" (Dyson 15). Creators for original anime like *Pretty Cure* collaborate at the level of the studio, holding story meetings on a weekly basis between the series' central planners. This collective labor is then represented in a television program that manifests its various interests and promotes its ancillary media extensions. The broadcast, in its centralizing of media and media creation, becomes a kind of convergence text, tying together its producers and animators, the program and its advertisements, and, most importantly, its viewers to sponsored goods, into what I call a "product portal"—a toy-based narrative device that generates profits for the show, studio and supporting industries.

Toei Animation's creative decisionmaking for its magical girl media mix is often highly organized around promoting consumer goods to domestic audiences through the production of television anime for children. My experience observing the anime production of *Smile Precure!* mirrors Ian Condry's in his chronicle of the construction of NHK's television anime series, *Dekoboko Friends* (2002–2011). The production of both shows are prime examples of how viable, long-running anime is often organized not according to plots or stories, but by a combination of customizable IP and licensing elements such as characters, premises, and world settings (Condry 54–84). Condry, however, downplays the effect that sponsors have in the process of creation, largely as a result of the more ancillary role that licensed merchandise played in the production of *Dekoboko Friends*. In my time observing Toei Animation's productions, as well as the role of licensed products in many popular children's anime, I found that sponsors and their merchandise have a much more vocal role—both industrially and creatively—in the process of a given anime program's production. Elements such as characters, premises and world settings

might be created by directors, writers and producers, but they are also harnessed by advertising representatives and toy manufacturers, all of whom come together to generate ideas, overcome problems, and create a series that will benefit the entire committee.

As the series's creators must straddle responsibilities to various corporate bodies, interests and audiences, *Smile Precure!* similarly features characters who are principally represented through their transformation, straddling worlds and responsibilities to their families, friends, and comrades. Products that emphasize metamorphosis, transformation and transportation become symbolic tools that connect fantasy to reality, as fans of the show are encouraged to participate in a franchise's fantasy through the consumption of magical trinkets. Since the producers of the *Smile Precure!* television anime construct episodes with the long-term aim of increasing the sale of character goods over the course of a year, *Pretty Cure* as media experience is a good example of how the media mix successfully harnesses participation through ubiquitous consumption, using "things" to create media, and media to enhance the value of "things." The dependent relationship of media and things creates a symbiotic experience that begins in but extends well beyond the television broadcast.

To better comprehend how the construction of *Smile Precure!*'s media mix is tied into its viewers' experience of the show, *Pretty Cure*'s depiction of metamorphosis and gender roles should be understood as coinciding with changing developments in the Japanese society. In particular, the magical girl anime transforms from a genre with conventional narrative and character tropes to a genre capable of combining and fusing various ideologies, narrative themes and industrial practices, embodied most emphatically by the genre-bending *Smile Precure!* This elusion of stable categories and boundaries sets up the creative action behind the script meetings of *Smile Precure!* Toys are developed through staff collaboration between producers, directors, writers and advertising reps who construct characters, develop worlds and make narratives organized around "magical items" that double as consumer products. These creative decisions manifest themselves visually and experientially in the television series, bringing local audiences into the text through the medium of transforming characters and products.

A New Kind of Magical Girl: *Pretty Cure*

When *Sailor Moon* concluded its television run in the late 1990s, Toei replaced its airtime slot with an original anime series titled *Ojamajo Doremi* (*Bothersome Witch Doremi*, 1999–2003). For the first time, the studio created a “magical girl” television anime series without the use of a *gensaku*, or pre-existing manga property. The *gensaku* for *Doremi* was later conceived by Tōdō Izumi, a pseudonym for a creative team in the planning department responsible for coming up with the series concept.<sup>1</sup> Because the studio was not beholden to the copyright of another author, the series’s success was largely contingent on the creative abilities of the studio and toy company staff. The lack of a pre-existing manga audience was viewed as a strength: the creators could target the anime at a much younger audience of girls, as young as preschool, moving the broadcast from its evening “golden time” slot to Sunday morning; both the comical episodic content and colorful character designs reflected this shift. These creative decisions carried over to the production and media mix of what became Toei’s longest-running and most popular magical girl anime franchise, *Pretty Cure*, beginning with *Futari wa Pretty Cure* (*We Are Pretty Cure*, 2004).

*Futari wa Pretty Cure* was the first in a lineage that has spanned over ten different series. *Futari wa Pretty Cure* took the concepts behind *Sailor Moon* and *Ojamajo Doremi* and added several features, while also refining the Toei formula into a model that could be replicated in subsequent series. The series revolves around two middle-school girls who are granted magic powers to combat the forces of darkness. The girls have two very different personalities, but find ways to communicate and work together when they transform, using special devices resembling makeup compacts and bracelets, into powerful warriors called “Cures.” This story formula has changed little in the years following, with new series in the *Pretty Cure* franchise incorporating minor changes to the number of girls, types of items and thematic conflicts. The ninth *Pretty Cure* series, *Smile Precure!*, is no different, tweaking the formula to accommodate current social events and cultural trends. Five girls from the same middle school are recruited to become the legendary *Pretty Cure* warriors by the magic fairies Candy and Pop (see Figure 1). They ask the Cures to protect



FIGURE 1. Characters of *Smile Precure!* (courtesy of Toei Animation)

the magical kingdom of Marchenland from the evil lord Pierrot, who has sent his subordinates to Earth to absorb the “bad energy” of humans in order to resurrect his ultimate form. The girls are granted special items that grant them powers to fight and purify these invaders.

The show appeals primarily to a target audience of young female viewers and a barely acknowledged audience of older (mostly male) *otaku* fans. The latter are slyly catered to in various ways and are far from an “accidental audience,” the term used to describe unplanned male fans of the children’s show *My Little Pony* (Burdfield 129). For example, the director for the first *Pretty Cure* series, Nishio Daisuke, was the director for Toei’s long-running adventure and battle anime *Dragon Ball* (as well as its feature-length animated films); he brought his trademark flair for action sequences and hand-to-hand combat scenes to bear on the *Pretty Cure* battles. This emphasis on physical violence, a hallmark of male-oriented *shōnen* (boys) series, is a major difference between *Pretty Cure* and its magical girl predecessors. In the late 1990s, more *shōnen* manga and anime began to introduce fighting female characters into previously male-dominated casts, a possible carry-over from the “battling babes” of adult-oriented anime and manga of the 1980s. *Pretty Cure* recognizes this older male audience, as well as the changing preferences of a female audience that has absorbed both *shonen* and *shōjo* series from a young age. The heroines now perform elaborate martial arts moves and physical attacks in addition to magical spells, with the resulting show featuring frenetic and violent battles



between the Cures and the villains in the vein of an action-packed *shonen* series.

Similar to the various magical girl anime of past decades, much of this visual and thematic and transformation is a response to genre innovations and audience tastes. Kumiko Saito argues that magical girl anime are no longer a genre at all, but rather, “a code that binds certain ideological values and advantages attributed to the *shōjo* identity in contemporary Japan” (Saito 157). Some scholars, such as Akiko Sugawa-Shimada, argue that this collapse of gender distinctions has resulted in a new form of “powerful but cute and nurturing superheroine” different from the superwomen of Western popular culture (Sugawa-Shimada, “Children”). Sugawa-Shimada argues that the superheroines of *Smile Precure!* in particular represent an evolution of female fighters in their complete lack of appeal to male authority figures and their embrace of stereotypically male, or at least *shōnen*, virtues, such as “decision-making, responsibility, victory, and confidence” (Sugawa 257–58). Saito, on the other hand, suggests that men embracing these new superheroines signify male resistance to conservative “gendered responsibilities,” such as having a career and creating/supporting a family (Saito 161). Regardless if one thinks of these new magical girls as superheroines, repurposed appeals to tradition, or the propagation of hypersexualized stereotypes, the magical girl genre, particularly through the change of the cultural role and reception of the *shōjo*, is a way to see how producers attempt to react to evolving audience tastes and judgments. *Smile Precure!*, in particular, is collaboratively designed to reflect many industrial interests, but to target the domestic audience via methods to which previous fantasy shows only alluded.

## Productive Labor

The planning committee at Toei Animation establishes most of the characters, settings and premises nine months to a year before a show is set to air, well before the writers, producers and directors get together to construct even a single episode. After the concept of the series was established, *Smile Precure!* was simultaneously pitched to the potential sponsors and co-creators of the show: the Osaka-based broadcasting network Asahi Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the

ad agency Asatsu-DK (ADK). This media triangle functions in ways similar to a miniature *seisaku iinkai*, or production committee, composed of various media companies that contribute a portion of the costs of production in order to disperse the risk of financial failure.<sup>2</sup> In the case of *Pretty Cure*, ABC paid for a broadcast slot at a lucrative time and day, while ADK represented the interests of Bandai Namco, a company which specializes in games and toys for children, and which produces toys based on the characters and world of *Smile Precure!* The toys that appear in the show are largely decided, designed, and distributed by Bandai Namco, while Toei provides their own suggestions based on the series concept.

When I first observed a script meeting for *Smile Precure!* in February of 2012 at a small office located just outside of Toei Animation's Oizumi studios, they were already over three months into writing scripts for the series. Meetings take place in the evenings and always near the studio, since the series directors must be on site at nearly all hours to supervise production, inspect the work of the staff, and relay changes or immediate requests from producers after meetings. The room consists of two producers from Toei, one producer each from ABC and ADK, several veteran writers, and series director Otsuka Takashi corraling the various interests. As a series director, Otsuka is responsible for setting and maintaining the tone, quality and style of the series, supervising in some way nearly all aspects of production. This is Otsuka's first project as a series director, though he had worked as a director and key animator at Toei over nine years on previous *Pretty Cure* episodes and even three *Pretty Cure* feature-length animated films.

Once the basic announcements are out of the way and individual scripts are reviewed, a schedule is distributed which has different columns and categories for the featured "Cure Decor" and other goods of the week. Instructions are written for how to incorporate the toys into the episodes, based on suggestions from Otsuka and the various producers. Staff must be closely familiar with collectable items such as Cure Decors and transforming devices such as Smile Pacts so that they know how these devices will be dispersed in the anime series (see Figure 2). An understanding of the characters and premises here only partly explains how anime creation is collaborative, and how anime within the media mix corrals the resources of its participants. While characters guide how individual episodes are structured, toys



FIGURE 2. Examples of *Pretty Cure* merchandise. (photo by author)

and items function as narrative marks in the larger story that the writers and animators must hit, weaving their backgrounds and designs into the show on a continual basis.

Product placement in film and television can be obtrusive or well-integrated, though the product itself often has little bearing on the characters or story. It is typically done in order to satisfy a sponsor, whether it is thrown in innocuously like a fast food beverage, or highlighted for its performance like a Bond luxury car. Ellen Seiter has documented how toys function within the programs for boys' and girls' cartoons in the United States, with complex episodes structured around toy figurines from *My Little Pony* to *Ghostbusters*. With anime, such products can appear weekly and rely on consistent exposure to generate sales, so the anime creators and advertising representatives work together to best integrate these products into the show in ways that are similarly central to the narrative. In *Smile Precure!*, Cure Decors are special magic pieces that can be used to revive the queen of Marchenland, but they are also used to power the Smile Pact, the Pretty Cures' main transformation device that changes them from middle-school classmates to a team of fighting magical girls. In order to transform, the girls open their Pact and place a ribbon-shaped elemental Cure Decor inside the recess, but other Cure Decors grant the girls items, accessories and abilities when set into the Pact.

Thus, a portion of every episode, as well as during commercial breaks, is spent on the acquisition or utilization of the Cure Decors or the Pact, each of which relies on the continued narrative presence of the other.

A list of Cure Decors is passed out to the members in the room, displaying the first sixteen Cure Decors to appear in the series; their look and name are supplied, but their incorporation is left up to the writers. A specific Cure Decor is assigned to each episode for the Pretty Cures to collect, and more elaborate and expensive new products are introduced as pivotal plot points where the Cures gain a significant new ability or access to a once restricted area. The products of *Smile Precure!* essentially organize the trajectory of the series narrative, suggesting ways for the creators to alter or direct the story or character development to serve the needs of the toys' appearance. With some toys, this sort of direction is more innocuous. Cure Decors, for example, are integrated into the episode at the whim of each writer. Sometimes, this results in an object or ability that is crucial to defeating the villain of the week, while in other cases, the Decor is simply a token reward for victory. With other, more expensive toys, entire plot threads are dedicated to fleshing out their significance. The introduction of a new wand, for example, leads to a series of episodes in which the Pretty Cures gain a new set of powers that become crucial to transforming their existing identities.

Some of these toys, such as Cure Decors, are collectible, but most, like the show's mascot, Candy, are endlessly customizable. This is a hallmark of girls' toys that Seiter claims distinguishes them from boys' toys, where "color and design features (style) are the realm of diversification among objects that are essentially similar" (Seiter 155).<sup>3</sup> Candy, for example, is narratively and visually woven into the anime series in ways that encourage and direct play through customization. The show's cute fairy mascot is literally shaped for narrative integration as a stuffed animal commodity and is featured alongside the Pretty Cures in nearly every episode. A set of diagrams is passed out during the meeting, detailing a dozen different "hair-styles" that mold her fuzzy ears into chic styles, with her ears tied up, down, off to one side, in ponytails, pigtails, bobs or weaves. These concepts appear on Candy at various points in the first several episodes, not simply to encourage children to beg their parents for

Candy, but to continually provide them with ideas about how to play with and design her (see Figure 3).

Candy is designed to get children to constantly upgrade her with the latest fashions and accessories from the television show. Another diagram is passed out which shows a special hairdryer and brush that help with styling her hair in all of the cumbersome designs featured in the show; a *Pretty Cure* protagonist shows how to use the hairdryer to mold her friend's fuzzy ears. Concept art for necklaces, dresses and mini tiaras are also passed out, all of which will be incorporated at some point into the design of the characters. As the show progresses, Candy's role moves from supporting to central character while simultaneously being tied to the characters through various toys that are utilized in the anime episodes. Eventually, Candy becomes integral to the plot as a sort of sixth *Pretty Cure*.<sup>4</sup> Candy is the ideal use of anime's sponsored merchandise, tying in the interests of the sponsor directly to the outcome and impact of the narrative.

While the team of writers might use some of these objects in the story, their visual incorporation is up to series director Otsuka to make all of these products fit seamlessly into the anime's world and alongside its characters. In his early thirties, Otsuka appears too young to be in charge of such an important series for the company, but working on so many previous titles has allowed him to



FIGURE 3. A young girl plays with Candy. (photo by author)

understand the characters and premises of *Pretty Cure* better than just about any director who had previously helmed the show. His energy is fitting for a position that involved such a countless number of tasks. When I ask him how he handles the various interests in the show's production, he says that remaining objective is what keeps him level:

It's not really about what I want, to be honest; it's about what I feel is right for the anime. When I draw animation for [the pirate series] *One Piece*, I might put in some drawings that reflect my style, but for the most part, I'm keeping to the material. It's not my job to alter the manga to what I think is better. It's the same for *Pretty Cure*. It's an anime for children as young as kindergarten, and it has its own traditions. It would be selfish of me to strictly impose my personal tastes. I love horror, and if I put in horror stories all the time, I might love it and think, 'Wow, this is so great!' But the anime's fans won't like it, and the show won't sell any toys. Individuality has its place, but that doesn't mean that it's good for every anime. (Otsuka, Personal interview)

Otsuka hits on the commercial aspect of economically successful anime: conspicuous individuality is subservient to the main goal of selling toys. Though Otsuka does direct an episode in the series that is a love letter to the "robot anime of his youth," for the most part, his early exposure to the show has conditioned him to view his role as the creator of a combined advertisement, simultaneously realizing the desires of both creators (writers, artists, animators) and sponsors (producers, advertising reps). One such sponsor-producer of the series tells me Otsuka is rare in this respect: "Many directors become obsessed with telling their own story for the show and forget about their responsibility to the sponsor. Otsuka's talent lies in his ability to express himself while also incorporating the sponsor in interesting ways. He's very mature for a young director" (Sasaki).

During a break in the meeting, Otsuka and the producers get together to look at the early concept art for a toy clock that is still in development. The clock will be released around the middle of September, but the details of its design need to be ironed out months in advance. The toy is the most expensive of the series, equipped with an LED display that shows the time, and playable mini games when a particular Cure Decor is placed in a recess. How the clock will be

incorporated into the show is still undecided, though it will likely be an item that provides the Pretty Cures with a new ability or enhanced transformation. Its design is important going forward, particularly to find a balance between how the clock's aesthetic design will satisfy the goals of both the toy company and the animation department.

Otsuka and the producers look over the clock's blueprint. It has wings on the side, but Otsuka says these should be trimmed. "These will be difficult to show when the clock is sideways," he says. He sketches onto the design to show how he best thinks the clock can be changed. Ultimately, the decision to change designs lies with toy company Bandai Namco, but the designers understand that for their product to be best displayed every week, the animators' know best. Otsuka turns to the head writer for the show. "How are we going to use this again?" The writer looks intently at the concept art. "It could be a way to attack the opponents. Maybe once they put a special Cure Decor in there, the clock creates a massive energy wave" (Otsuka, Personal interview, 2012). The committee brainstorms for the clock's use, with different ideas being shut down or tabled depending on how they can be visually represented in the show. As Otsuka puts it, "The design isn't satisfying my wishes; it's satisfying the wishes of everyone involved. Or rather, the characters and toys are molded based on what we agree is the best direction for them. If someone has a good idea, we say, 'Ah, that's better, let's go with that.' The process is not about pleasing everyone, but using everyone's ideas to get the best possible result" (Otsuka, Personal Interview, 2014). Ultimately, it is decided that the clock will channel the spiritual energy of the Pretty Cure warriors into creating a more powerful attack, where the LED display becomes a sort of control panel for the clock's power. After the meeting is over, Otsuka goes back to the studio to relay these decisions to the episode directors, animators and artists who work on putting these products into future episodes of the show.

## Animating Labor

How do such toys appear in these episodes? Typically, they are displayed in exquisite detail using a much higher number of drawings, sweeping camerawork, special digital effects processing, and, more

recently, expensive computer-generated imagery. They are most prominently showcased in transformation sequences for the *Pretty Cures*, lengthy scenes that are repeated in virtually every episode and comprise what is traditionally called the anime's bank system, where entire sequences of animation are reused from episode to episode to trim costs and reduce the material and human resources needed to make new animation. By using the bank system every episode for these scenes of transformation, the products displayed can be advertised week in and week out with the same level of detail. Since *Magical Girl Minky Momo's* 1981 debut, scenes of character metamorphosis in magical girl anime have grown longer, featuring the product and its transformative effects in increasing detail.<sup>5</sup> This increased detail evinces the idea that the transformation sequences—and by extension, the products—are the most important segments in the *Pretty Cure* series, given their visual and technical prominence in every episode. The bank itself has become a point of obsession for fans and a point of pride for creators.<sup>6</sup>

Anime is unique in that entire scenes are often given to animators to draw the *genka*, or key frames, which are the main drawings of movement. No animator draws exactly the same way, and fans of *sakuga*—another word for animation that emphasizes the qualities of movement—began searching for and analyzing the qualities of specific animators beginning with the development of home video and the ability to rewind and replay stand-out animated sequences. The prolific director and animator Aoyama Mitsuru, for example, has become well known among fans for drawing all of the key frames for an entire episode of *Pretty Cure* for thirteen consecutive seasons. While the key frames for most episodes are divided up among a handful of animators, Aoyama's ability to take on all of the key frame duties becomes both a signature episode for fans and a showcase for his personal touch to fellow animators, and his work is acknowledged in the end credits of the episode when his is the only name listed under the key frames.

This attention to drawing has led to animators being recognized for their work on detailed and elaborate bank segments, an ironic development considering that bank animation was originally simple, repetitive, collaboratively made, and intended to cut the costs of an animation production. The bank of the series has instead become an ostentatious showcase to display its wares using the talents of



individual animators. Each season's bank sequences seems to feature spectacular animation that attempts to one-up the previous season. Some animators have staked their reputations as bank animators, Shida Naotoshi, who has become a specialist in such sequences after having single-handedly drawing key frames for over a half dozen transformations. In these sequences, animators are given a great deal of freedom, and if they have the time and inclination, are allowed to expand upon the storyboards with their own interpretations and personal expression. Shida typically animates his characters in these sequences with exaggerated rubbery limbs and dynamic camera work that zooms in and out on the character. He also gives his characters idiosyncratic touches in their poses and small movements inspired by Japanese pop idols or Hollywood film characters (Kobayashi 77). For *Smile Precure*, Shida animated a transformation sequence over a minute long that begins and ends with the flying mythical horse Pegasus composed of energy beams, an idea inspired from playing the Galaxy stages on the Nintendo 3DS video game *Mario Kart 7*.

With the current generation of Internet-using fans, it has become even easier to identify and acknowledge animators through fan-created wikis and the advent of Twitter, where a large community of animators has created accounts as personal outlets to discuss their work. Nagamine Tatsuya, series director of *Heart Catch Precure*, acknowledged the work of Shida and the in-between animators in the creation of Cure Sunshine's transformation bank in one tweet, specifically giving the number of drawings that the staff completed as an obvious sign of their dedication and love of the medium, as well as an advertisement for the upcoming episode for followers of the series and his account (Nagamine). In essence, the animators use *Pretty Cure's* animated advertisements to broadcast their own labor. Series director Otsuka was one of the biggest promoters of the creators behind *Smile Precure!* During the show's syndication rebroadcast, Otsuka did a series of tweets for each episode that highlighted notable work from staff members. He singled out specific animators and directors, identifying each of their contributions in specific well-animated scenes and particularly the bank sequences. In a pair of tweets discussing episode five, for example, he praises Miyamoto Emiko and Itaoka Nishiki for original work that captured the character and her special abilities (Otsuka, Reika's first). The animators replied to Otsuka's tweets about the series' production, offering behind-the-

scenes knowledge for followers of their Twitter accounts. Moreover, fans were then able to communicate directly with the animators, expressing their appreciation for the scene or for the animators' work as a whole. The bank sequences thus functioned as gateways into the lives of animators, allowing fans to directly communicate their admiration for high-quality work, while also allowing animators to receive recognition for their work despite not having an "above the line" credit such as a director, producer or writer.

## Product Portals

These crafted animated segments are gateways into the backgrounds of animators, but they also effectively work as transportation devices that shuttle the audience into the world of the characters. It is instructive to think of these bank-designed instances of textually integrated toys and characters as what can be called product portals. Unlike character products, which are any merchandise spun off from a character image, product portals are merchandise narratively and visually woven into the fabric of the show. They serve a transformative and dynamic process in the show by delivering highly interactive media experiences that activate users' imaginations in the extratextual construction of the story. As portals can provide organized gateways into diverse amounts of information and connect gaps in different registers of media, anime products can connect characters to viewers, and fantasy spaces to spaces of everyday reality. Product portals become connective tools that slide between characters and viewers: they position the viewer within the character's world and show them how they can integrate into it.

An analysis of such sequences shows how media and products combine to form a visually intoxicating and kaleidoscopic experience that blurs the animated and real-life spaces of its viewers. The first shot in *Smile Precure's* transformation sequence is not of the girls, but of the transformation device itself, the Smile Pact. The girls open the Pact and place a Cure Decor into the Pact's recess, turning it into a magic device, which the girls use to transform each segment of their body. The subsequent shots in the sequence all revolve around the Pact and its transforming powers, as each shot showcases an isolated limb being transformed through the Pact's powers. The visual treatment of

the Pact differs from the rest of the episode's animation in its use of computer-generated imagery to render the contours and movement of the Pact as close to the real toy Pact as possible. The Pact's sound effects in the transformation sequence, such as the clicking sound when the Pact opens or the fairy voice that projects from the Pact when a Cure Decor is placed in the recess, are also identical to the sounds that the toy Pact makes in real life. This fidelity to the original product goes beyond product placement and into the realm of product glorification, making the transformation devices stand out in appearance from the rest of the episode through longer shot length, a higher number of shots, and, most importantly, detailed full animation rendered from an increased drawing count. Here, the products manage to eclipse the characters and are yet framed by their reaction to them. The toys become transformation devices on two levels: they transport characters into the space of transformation, and they transport the anime's world into the viewer's social environment by incorporating the toy's visual and aural design.

Narratively, the transformation bank also comes at a pivotal moment in each episode. Anime typically divides its episodes into two segments: A parts, which come before the commercial break, and B parts, which come after it. In *Smile Precure!*, the A part is devoted to drama and relationships between characters, while the B part revolves around battle-oriented climaxes that resolve earlier dramatic conflicts. The transformation bank almost always appears in the B part and, thus, comes at the narrative moment in the episode that signifies action and resolution, a fact that does not escape Hori in his observation that toy companies are always sponsors of shows with heavy battle sequences, often stemming from transformation (Hori 122-24). The repetition of the bank is designed to condition viewers to appreciate and associate these products with instant pleasure that signals the beginning of relief and release. This release functions in multiple ways depending on the viewer's background. Where younger viewers might be preoccupied with the narrative function of the transformation, older viewers are more likely to obsess over the beautifully rendered and sexualized transforming image of an attractive young girl expressed through the animator's skill in lush full animation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in economically, narratively, and emotionally satisfying terms, the bank transformation sequence is the "money shot" of the entire episode.<sup>8</sup>

Such sequences are enhanced by commercials virtually grafted to the anime series that advertise the very products that are showcased in the anime. In tightly coordinated cases, commercials can even fill in narrative and visual gaps in order to smoothly transition fans to the toys once an episode's narrative is ostensibly complete. A good example of this is the thirtieth episode of the television series, which reveals a magical clock to the Pretty Cure heroines without explaining the origin or function of the clock itself ("A Voyage Around the World Through the Door of Books!"). The episode concludes without any sense of narrative closure, leaving viewers without an answer to the mystery of the clock, but the narrative resolves itself in the advertisements for the program. When the episode ends on a medium shot of the animated clock, the scene is immediately followed by a commercial that begins with a close-up shot of the toy version of the Royal Rainbow Clock. The camera pans out, revealing a near-identical clock that was featured at the end of the anime episode. The commercial essentially picks up where the episode leaves off, with the unexplained function of the clock becoming the topic of the advertisement. Child actors, dressed in the garb of the Pretty Cures, show how to use the clock by embedding a special Cure Decor in its receptacle. Once the clock is "activated," the Pretty Cures appear with new costumes and wands, indicating that the clock has given them special abilities. The commercial concludes by telling children that the clock can be used to transmit signals to the Smile Pact of their friends, effectively connecting it to other product portals that have appeared in similar advertisements, and which continue to be employed within the anime's narrative (see Figure 4).

Commercials for *Smile Precure!* reference back to the series while simultaneously incorporating the viewer into the show's world. If the anime uses near-identical models of toys to better reference the products, then the commercials use the same audiovisual language of the television anime to more closely tie the products to the characters. The activation of the clock, for example, recalls the transformation sequences of the Pretty Cures, where the clock is suspended in a rainbow-colored space in order to better emphasize the product's features. The digital effects that surround the clock—sparkles once the Cure Decor is placed, rainbow-colored trails of light that follow the child's movements—also call back to the anime's enhanced digital effects processing and compositing that makes up the transformation bank.



FIGURE 4. Transport/transform: from anime to ad to reality. (screenshots)

Once activated, the clock emits a recording of the Pretty Cure warriors incanting a magical enchantment, though the spell has yet to appear in the show since the clock itself has not yet been activated. The use of child actors, rather than animation here, is also notable. The commercial bridges the program and the living room, spurring fans to purchase the toy for themselves to extend the characters' lives and world through play. In essence, the commercials suggest children take an active role in figuring out the mystery of the Royal Rainbow Clock and enacting the Pretty Cures' adventure when the broadcast has concluded by purchasing the toy for themselves.

The importance of the product portal to anime consumption reflects what Lash and Lury have identified as a design focus in the contemporary "thingification of media," where mediated goods are turned into consumable material objects through their "aesthetic integrity" or a "discursive unity" (25). By connecting toys narratively

and aesthetically to the series, the experience of the show (the extended act of play) becomes deeper, though inevitably tied to the consumption of the series' products. The series repeatedly encourages viewers to consume and discard to feel connected to a dynamic world of fluid transformation. *Pretty Cure* is no less commercial than many other forms of mass media, but its transformative products are massaged and managed to deliver a unique value that is developed through continued engagement with the series. Lash and Lury argue, "As companions to the mundane routines of daily life—as alarm clocks, as mugs, as key-rings, as back-packs—the resulting merchandise offers the reminder of a child-like ability to be beside oneself, to be transported beyond oneself" (104). Product portals, in their relation to the transformation of bodies and identities through aesthetically pleasing means, tie the experience of playing with the toy to the narrative of the series, imbricating the mythology of the characters and their world into everyday spaces.

There is also the issue of how viewers directly express their admiration or enjoyment of a particular series through such consumption. Experiences of attempting to virtually connect fantasy to reality can be similar to alternate-reality games or other transmedia activities that ask users to participate when the consumption of the original media has finished, but with *Pretty Cure* and its sister shows, the commodity is tied into the texts themselves through careful integration from as early as the level of the script's construction. The alternate media is no longer optional, but essential to constructing *and* consuming the text. Obviously, this participation comes at a cost, and many viewers might be financially shut out of experiencing the coordinated pleasures of *Pretty Cure's* magical girl media mix, especially with the creation of a new set of toys every year. However, in a time where more people expect content to be free or at least offered at a reduced rate, and where media professionals—and especially anime creators—struggle to find ways of recuperating the considerable costs needed to finance creative production, the integrated consumption of *Pretty Cure* is managed in a way that makes fans direct benefactors, and the *de facto* sponsors, of the series through their support of particular characters and toys.

## Conclusion

As the *Pretty Cure* franchise has continued and the world of the anime has expanded upon the original series, subsequent series have introduced new variations on the theme of teenage girls who magically transform into fighting heroines. Like fans of many multimedia franchises today, the fandom of *Pretty Cure* extends beyond any single series, and into what is now a larger world of the transforming characters, cute mascots and magical items that comprise it. As Will Brooker states, it is “worth asking whether these narratives of digital mastery are, at their most obvious, little more than advertising; and, at their most insidious, a training for the contemporary subject’s role within 21st-century capitalism” (571). Indeed, one could argue that series such as *Pretty Cure* train children to be hungry little consumers, latching on to new trends and discarding material goods no longer deemed relevant. Every year, a new set of toys is hatched from this template, with the well-oiled machine endlessly repeating itself with subtle variations and fresh ideas, but with a dwindling population of animators and young girls amidst a graying Japan.

However, there is an involvement that the magical girl media mix has with its audience that is perhaps less insidious than at first appears. Viewers are encouraged to participate in the consumption of the property, but through a wide variety of media—from the animation of the television show to theatrical films to live performances—that in essence are a way for fans to channel their direct sponsorship of the series. One might view this as a form of friendly commodification similar to the frequently used *teleshop* onscreen titles used on variety shows that clarify or make sense of material for viewers in order to draw and keep their attention for the sake of advertisers. The multiple ways in which *Smile Precure!* is able to tap into these various spaces not simply to communicate, but to guide fans toward participation is unique to the medium of anime, with its broad cross-media flows, heavily integrated sponsorship, and its malleable and migrating characters. The anime’s media mix is, similarly, a commodification strategy that demands participation not just for the sake of continued ratings, but for enjoying any of the ancillary media of its manga and anime. Toys in *Pretty Cure* effectively produce a perpetual media

experience that revolves not only around conspicuous exposure, constant commodity consumption, but also considerable participatory pleasures.

## Notes

1. The name is a portmanteau assembled from Toei Dōga's old company name, and their animation studio located in Ōizumi, Tokyo.
2. Such partnerships have become particularly necessary for anime production following the collapse of the bubble economy and video rental market, as private investors are much less willing to finance low-rated anime shows and direct-to-video productions.
3. This can be considered a hallmark of the *Pretty Cure* series in general, as the show renews itself, and its merchandise, every year.
4. In a possible attempt to enable success by association, she is even voiced by the same actress as Pikachu, the star critter for the global smash hit anime and video game franchise, *Pokémon*.
5. The sequences are given to veteran animators, who typically draw the layouts and key frames entirely on their own, and the scenes are opportunities for such animators to display their skills and create vivid animation unfettered from the rest of the episode's narrative. The transformation sequence's "bank" featuring these transforming toys has steadily increased its duration throughout the years, but also its quality and detail, to the point that the transformation sequences for the complete team of *Pretty Cures* in *Smile Precure!* lasts over three minutes and 10,000 drawings, a stark contrast to the roughly 3000 drawings typically required to animate a single television anime episode.
6. The construction of an attractive transformation bank can be framed in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital," where animators gain cultural cache, but also industrial value, through their authorship of such sequences. Though the sponsor does not require the bank to be a certain length, animators have viewed this segment as an area to display their technical skills.
7. Okada Toshio observed that obsessive anime fans called *otaku* first emerged in the 1980s during the birth of the video recorder and the newfound ability for fans to linger over and dissect particular sequences of animation that had theretofore been ignored through television consumption (8). This historical background helps to partly explain why the show has become so popular with an audience—older anime fans—who are not necessarily the show's intended audience.
8. Allison also uses this term to describe sequences of transformation in her discussion of the aesthetics of robot shows and *sentai* fighting teams, where she links the culmination of sexual arousal in the male body in straight pornography to that of the metallic body in kids' mass entertainment. Where robots and *sentai* fixated on the details of warfare, *Pretty Cure* fixates on the details of the heroines' contours. What all three—porn, mecha and magical girl shows—share is the titillation that arouses from being exposed to the hidden secrets of various bodies. These shows were a direct inspiration to the creation of *Sailor Moon* and, eventually, *Pretty Cure* (103–14).

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